

# Families of POWs in China

## Pin Hopes on Nixon's Trip

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[Chicago Tribune Press Service]

WASHINGTON, Feb. 5—As President Nixon prepares this week-end to submerge himself in study for his trip to Peking later this month, three families across the United States are anxiously awaiting to see what, if anything, the trip will mean to relatives being held prisoner in the mainland Chinese captivity.

The President's personal schedule is "blotted out" from next Tuesday until his expected departure for Peking on Feb. 17 so he can devote full time to preparations for the journey. The agenda for his talks with Chinese leaders has not been announced, but it is certain that the three American prisoners will be discussed.

Mrs. Mary Downey, 74, mother of John Downey who has been held by the Chinese since 1952, expressed optimism that her son might be released soon.

### Food has Improved

And in a recent letter received by Mrs. Carrie H. Smith, 75, of Roodhouse, Ill., mother of Air Force Maj. Philip Smith, the imprisoned pilot, said the food recently has improved so it now is better than at any time since he was captured in 1965. There also is more heat in his room than ever before, his letter said.

An optimist might suggest that the Chinese are preparing to send home Downey, Maj. Smith, and Comdr. Robert Flynn, a Navy pilot and the third American known to be held in Peking. Optimists also might even suggest that the captive trio could be put on President Nixon's plane at the end of his seven-day China visit.

But more realistic observers are quick to say that is not likely.

Smith has a son he has never seen. Flynn has a son who was 6 months old when he last saw him. Downey is a bachelor.

All three prisoners write regularly to their families, with letters arriving about once a month and, sometimes, less-frequently. None of the airmen has ever mentioned a trial nor given any indication of how he is being treated.

Downey, who was accused of working for the Central Intelligence agency when he and an American associate, Richard Fecteau, were seized 20 years ago, was tried for espionage, convicted, and sentenced to life imprisonment. Fecteau sentenced to 20 years in prison, recently was released. The Chinese, at that time, said they were commuting Downey's sentence to five years from the date of commutation, with no hint of when it was commuted.

### Civilian Army Employees

Downey and Fecteau were civilian army employees at the time of their arrest.

It is believed here that Downey, Smith, and Flynn all are in the same Peking prison, but are confined separately. There are indications that they have been alone in their cells since their imprisonment and even exercise alone.

Smith, now 38, doesn't say much about himself in his letters, his mother said this week. Mrs. Smith has lived alone on the family's 180-acre farm near Roodhouse since her husband died in 1968, three years after their son's capture.

He was taken prisoner when his F-104 jet was shot down near Hainan Island in the Gulf of Tonkin on Sept. 20, 1965.

In a telephone interview, Mrs. Smith said her son often writes of his dread of winter in China and had his family send special heavy boots to keep his feet warm. Mrs. Smith said he gave explicit instructions as to what kind of boots he wanted emphasizing the need for special soles to absorb moisture from his feet.

Rep. Paul Findley [R.] whose west central Illinois congressional district includes Roodhouse, has asked President Nixon if he might take a pair of such boots to Peking with him and ask the Chinese to give them to Smith.

### Writes to U.N. Aides

Findley has written to United Nations officials and to China's Premier Chou En-lai pleading for Smith's release,—or, at the very least, permission for his family to fly to Peking to visit him.

The letter to Chou, along with requests for a travel visa from Robert Smith, a

brother who lives in Clinton, Ia., have gone unanswered.

Flynn, the imprisoned navy pilot, is a native of Houston, Minn.

His wife, Mary, now lives in Colorado Springs, Colo., with their two children, Elizabeth, 8, and Robby 5. Flynn's letters home, which have not been received regularly, started shortly after he was shot down when his plane strayed over the Chinese border during bad weather while he was flying a mission over North Viet Nam on Aug. 21, 1967.

Mrs. Flynn, in a telephone interview, said she was convinced the Chinese would not be able to "break" her husband.

"He's giving them such a hard time, I imagine, that they would be glad to get rid of him," she said with a laugh.

Flynn also has asked for and received warm boots, his wife said.

Her children, like most, dislike peas, she said, but because peas are one of her husband's favorite vegetables, she frequently tells her children they will have to learn to like them "when Daddy comes home."

### Black Dog "Adopted"

A black dog, showing signs of being mostly Labrador retriever, recently "adopted" the Flynn's. Mrs. Flynn sent a picture of the dog to her husband, an avid hunter.

"I didn't tell Bob about its gimpy leg," Mrs. Flynn said, "but his legs probably will be a little gimpy too, so they should get along fine."

Joseph Smith, Circuit court clerk in Greene County in Illinois, recalled during an interview how his brother, had asked that his three-month tour in Viet Nam be moved up in 1965 so he could be home in time for the birth of his third child. The Air Force pilot was due home in October, two weeks after his plane was shot down.

Timothy was born the following December. Smith's two other children are Philip Jr., 9, and Debbie, 7.

Keeping their minds active during an obvious

continued

problem for the captives. In one letter to his mother, Smith said he had enjoyed reading about a new house being constructed by a friend and about new sheds going up on the family farm.

**"Board by Board"**

"I'm building it too," he wrote, "board by board, and putting on coats of varnish as well. I don't know how long it took . . . to finish the stone and wooden retaining walls around the yard, but I'm sure I've spent more time thinking about how to build those walls, then [it] did to actually do the work."

It is not difficult to visualize the impact on American public opinion toward Communist China if on live television, the American people could watch Nixon deliver the trio of imprisoned Americans into the arms of their families when he returns from Peking.

However, none of the families is expecting such a momentous event and Washington officials hesitate even to discuss the possibility of it happening.

Because of Peking's concern for the reaction from North Viet Nam, which is holding scores of American military flyers; the chances of Downey being returned would seem to be better than the prospects for Flynn and Smith.

Altho the three are the only Americans known to be held by the Communist Chinese, seven other United States fliers might be in their hands.

**Exhibits Wreckage Film**

On April 12, 1966, the Chinese shot down an American plane and later exhibited films of the wreckage. However, there was no mention of the plane's four-man crew. They were Reuben Harris of Columbus, Ohio; Larry Jordan of Cheyenne, Wyo.; Kenneth Pugh of Los Angeles, and William Classon, also of Los Angeles.

No word has been received of Joseph Dunn of Boston, a Navy pilot, believed shot down over the China Sea on Feb. 14, 1968.

Finally, no word has been received of Dain V. Scott of Pittsburgh, or J. Forrest Trembley of Norwich, Conn., crew members of a plane shot down at the same time that Flynn was captured.

However, the incident was so close to the Chinese-North Viet Nam border that American officials believe they could have been captured by the North Vietnamese if they survived.